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Go Peru

CSI:
Amazon

Laurence Mackin goes on the trail of big cats in the Peruvian rainforest

A SMALL GROUP gathers to examine the scene. Dark mutterings and speculation go on behind hands in the humid air. There are signs of a violent struggle, but it takes an expert, Dr Alan Lee, to walk us through a rough timeline of events. "He saw her here, chased this way – and here," he says, pausing for effect, unable to hide a grin, "is where he made the kill." The spot is marked with deep claw

marks. This puma has made light work of a rabbit down a dark jungle path in the dead of night – and none of us can hide our glee.

Las Piedras biodiversity station lies about eight hours by boat from the Peruvian mining town of Puerto Maldonado. Visitors are not here on safari; they come to work as research assistants on bird- and mammal-based projects.

We are here to study mammal and bird behaviour in the jungle on specific transects – paths that have been cut through the jungle – and on a nearby *colpa* or clay lick: the earth here is packed with potassium and sodium, and large groups of animals gather to eat the clay and socialise. It is something of a grazing ground for some of the most colourful creatures in the jungle, most notably the macaw and parrot families that call this area home.

But before recruits are let loose on the jungle there are two days of rigorous training, to get to grips with the equipment. Large machetes are sharpened and tested. GPS devices are carefully explained – and pretty much dismissed as useless, because of the remoteness of the region and the jungle's iron-clad canopy, so compasses and maps are our navigational tools.

There are intakes of breath when the group tests an innocent-looking venom extractor – essentially, a plastic syringe with a blunt end instead of a needle – though it is reassuringly simpler to use than the binoculars and telescope. We are given data sheets to fill out with details of animal behaviour we observe. But first we have to find the creatures.

Off to the jungle, then, for our first transect, a task that for most of us will become a daily ritual. We walk at a snail's pace

“The spot is marked with deep claw marks gouged in the soil . . . A puma has made light work of a rabbit down a jungle path in the dead of night – and none of us can hide our glee

marks gouged in the soil, a few lone pieces of fluff signifying another death in the jungle.

The scientists go to work, measuring, photographing, debating theories and motives, checking undergrowth for other clues, trying to form a definitive picture of what happened. After some huddled debate one thing is clear. This was no ordinary perpetrator: this was a puma.

A crowd of rubbernecks would never normally get this close to a scene, but this is no ordinary tourist crew. Out here the predators come in all shapes and sizes, from tiny coral snakes, just 20cm long, that can easily kill a man to pumas and jaguars that roam the forest, invisible until they leave their



HIGH LIFE Expedition leader Andy Stronach in the Amazon. Photograph: Laurence Mackin



along the pre-cut paths, keeping eyes and, more importantly, ears open for any movement or sound. Predictably, we are beyond useless, although the guide spots three leaves 20m up in the canopy that he insists are mealy parrots. He's not wrong, though it takes some fumbling with the binoculars before we believe in his seemingly super-human powers of observation.

Among the most common sights on these transects are various species of monkey. Long-limbed spider monkeys freefall from one tree to the next with effortlessly athletic crashes; saddleback tamarins scramble up trunks, eyes glinting in the sunlight that fights its way through the canopy; in the distance, howler monkeys raise a ghostly chorus, sounding like the wind of a rising storm; dusky titi monkeys chatter among themselves, ignoring us for the most part; one squirrel monkey decides he's had enough of our presence and

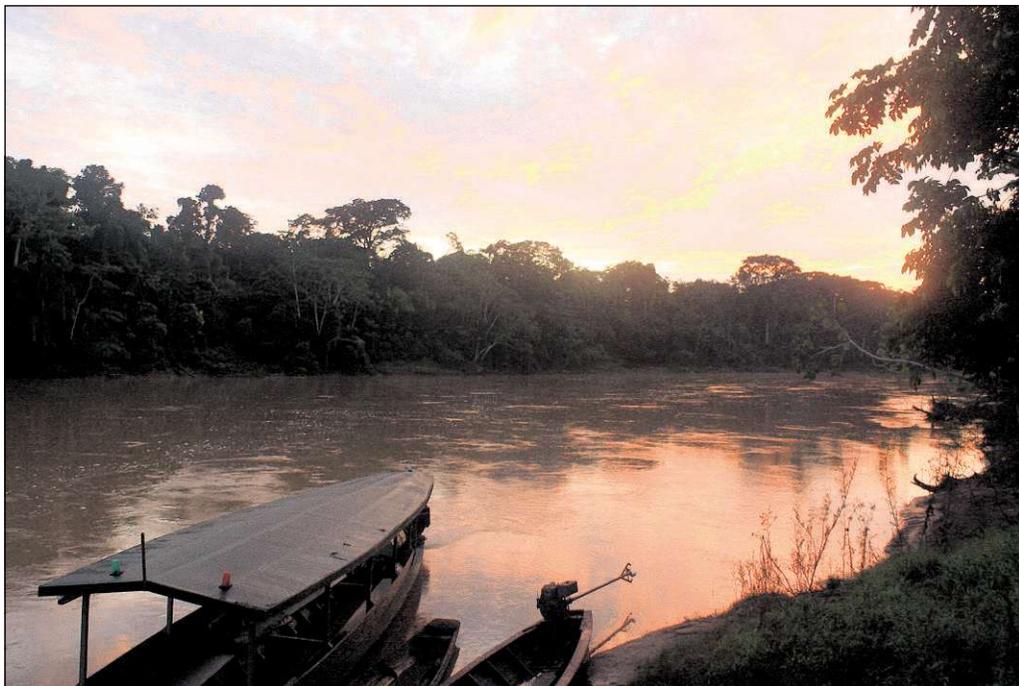
Go there

There are no direct flights to Peru from Ireland, but several airlines, including KLM (klm.ie), Lan (lan.com) and Iberia (iberia.com/ie), fly to Lima via their hubs. From there you can fly on to Puerto Maldonado with Lan or Star Peru (starperu.com). As locals are charged less for internal flights, you might be able to save money by booking through a Peruvian travel agency.





Phyl Clarke on Ireland's five-star pampering getaways: P8



In the Amazon: before an early-morning boat trip (above); macaws feeding on the colpa (left); the camp at Las Piedras (bottom left) and a puma (below). Photographs: Laurence Mackin, Biosphere Expeditions, Ed George/National Geographic/Getty

squawking soundtrack to the jungle, brilliantly at odds with their elegant appearance.

Occasionally, a boat chugging upriver, the noise of an unseen predator from the jungle or the munching of mid-morning snacks by sloppy team members (again, sorry about that) causes the birds to burst away from the colpa en masse.

It's infuriating in terms of data gathering – they can take hours to return in numbers – but thrilling: their iridescent plumage leaves fiery trails across the sky when the macaws and parrots rise up noisily in a glittering red, blue and green cloud. A rarer scarlet macaw adds a vivid slash of sunburst yellow.

But back to those killer cats. The chances of seeing one in the wild are practically nil, but there are echoes of them everywhere. Animal prints are studied in purpose-built track traps (essentially, dug-up soft earth) along the transects, and among the ocelot, peccary, armadillo and agouti markings are plenty of deep, dark prints of puma and jaguar.

Camera traps – small cameras with motion sensors – are set up along the transects by Dr Marcelo Mazzoli, a big-cat expert from Brazil, and towards the end of the expedition we take a six-hour hike to gather them in.

We find tracks near one box and decide to take a quick flick through its digital camera, knowing there is little chance of success. First there is a picture of us, then nothing, nothing, nothing, a deer, a heron – and then a huge adult male jaguar, red in snarling tooth and claw.

We return to the camp giddy as children, with a real sense of achievement. We may not have seen this jungle's most impressive predator, but we've come within a rather large whisker.

■ Laurence Mackin was a guest of Biosphere Expeditions (biosphereexpeditions.com). A two-week trip to Las Piedras costs about €1,130, excluding flights

starts depth-charging us with ripped-off chunks of branch.

These trees crawl with more than monkeys, though. In the roof of the staff sleeping quarters a pink-toed tarantula has taken up residence; early in the trip one guide returns with a clelia clelia snake, its skin a terrific shimmering colour that flits between silver and blue.

To get a more accurate flavour of what crawls beneath, we take a night transect. It is only when the torchlight is reflected back by thousands of frog, spider and insect eyes that you can see the jungle is teeming with life – the noise is almost deafening as the frogs woo each other with their terrific bossa-nova belches in the inky blackness.

During the day the noise is just as extraordinary: the birds and insects make oddly mechanical sweeping, whirring and clicking sounds. With sunlight filtering through the canopy of trees whose but-tressed roots stretch perhaps

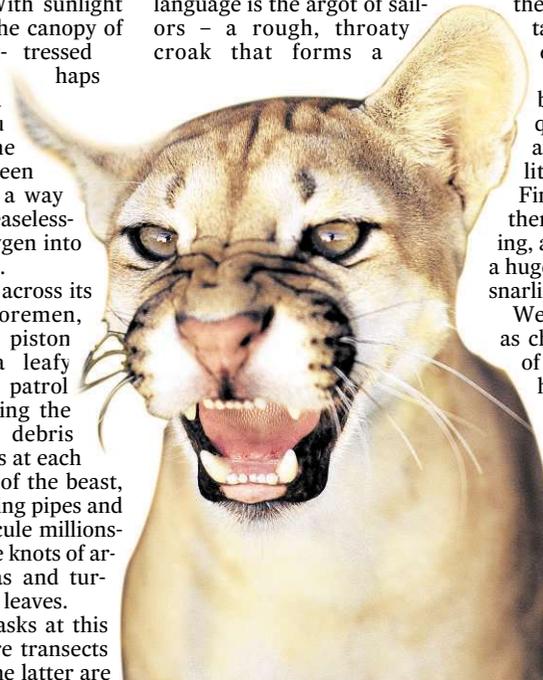
10m higher than a man, it is as if you are standing at the heart of a great green machine – and in a way you are, one that ceaselessly pumps fresh oxygen into the world around it.

Monkeys skitter across its branches like foremen, tweaking a green piston here, checking a leafy gauge there; birds patrol the treetops, keeping the machine clear of debris and hawking orders at each other; in the belly of the beast, insects toil at clearing pipes and exhausts in minuscule millions-strong armies while knots of armadillos, capybaras and turtles forage in fallen leaves.

The two main tasks at this research station are transects and colpa shifts. The latter are

much less active. A short boat trip across the river, a brief walk through the jungle and a stealthy half-crawl later we are in a bird hide across the river from the colpa proper on an early shift (we're up most mornings at 4am). We take it in turns to count the number of birds on the colpa; the second person follows the activity of a particular bird for one minute of every five, carefully describing its movements and behaviour to the third team member, who writes it all down.

The macaws claw their way through the trees, often in tight-knit pairs like muttering old married couples, bouncing from branch to branch, spinning upside down to show off their wingspan and pecking noisily at each other. Their glittering garb might have all the finery of European royalty's, but their language is the argot of sailors – a rough, throaty croak that forms a



GO OVERNIGHT

MAL ROGERS VISITS THE SCARLET HOTEL IN CORNWALL

DOMINIC, the young hot-tub caretaker, had gone off to get us a couple of proseccos. So we lay back in the steaming water and from our cliff-top perch watched the Atlantic surge into Mawgan Porth Bay. We could have scrubbed each other with seaweed bags for full algal satisfaction, but we just let the bladderwrack drift by. It was strangely therapeutic to watch it nudge our empty glasses – by now floating upright in the water – towards the edge of the tub.

Dominic, now equipped with two perfectly presented proseccos, arrived back in the nick of time. The wind was almost plucking his parka off his back, but he stuck to his tasks. He served us the proseccos, salvaged the empty glasses, then logged on – in the old-fashioned sense. More fuel was needed in the wood burner under our tub. Hot water surged in, keeping us deliciously warm as a stiff southwesterly whipped around the cliff face.

On this clear winter's evening the stars were out. As the steaming waters engulfed us we gazed skywards as some half dozen satellites processed across the sky – the nearest to a rush hour we saw all weekend in this secluded corner of Cornwall, in

“We could have rubbed each other with seaweed bags for full algal satisfaction, but instead we just let the bladderwrack drift by

southwesternmost England.

But then the Scarlet Hotel doesn't do busy. In reception a notice says: “Please pause for a moment. We know you are here and will be with you shortly.” Pause. Hmm, I haven't paused in a while. Had a bit of a breather, maybe; slowed down; even on the odd occasion chilled. But paused, well, no. All these options are on offer here: relaxation, both organic and organised, is available in spades.

We didn't have to pause for long at reception. Marcus appeared, dressed in brown yoga-type gear. A friendly young man from Derbyshire, he explained the ethos of the Scarlet. The hotel, grafted expertly on to the cliff face, is some 73 per cent more carbon

efficient than a conventional hotel. “Greenwash” is the name environmentalists give to the pretence of embracing ecology. Here at the Scarlet it's the real green deal: rainwater is harvested; “grey water” is used (basically, your bath water flushes the loo); the building is maintained by recyclable materials. Frankly, the Scarlet does give a damn. “As long as we all do us bit,” Marcus explained, sounding momentarily like someone from *Coronation Street*.



English style, from top: the hotel's relaxation terrace; its bar; and one of its bedrooms, in the Spacious category

The interior furnishings of the Scarlet are almost as dramatic as its views. Restaurants and public areas are all modishly minimal, but rich colours, tactile textures and playful retro designs create an overwhelming sense of luxury and comfort. Everywhere is full of lots of sexy, curvy lines – you half expect the bar area, with its rounded booths, to spin around like a fairground ride.

The bedrooms come in five categories: Just Right, Generous, Unique, Spacious and Indulgent. But whichever option your wallet runs to, it will be stylish and cool. All come with views and intriguing spaces – balconies, intimate gardens, shell-like viewing pods, terraces. A honeycomb of nooks and snugs throughout the hotel are also ideal as mini-retreats.

The restaurant provides the only area for a gripe. The service is laid back almost to the point of indolence. We had to wait an eternity for our proseccos. Maybe they were checking it out with Dominic.

But the food, when it did come, was sorcery itself. The menu, the work of Michelin-star-winning local Ben Tunncliffe, isn't

remotely brown riceish. He serves up fish, beasts, birds, gargantuan desserts and intriguing cheese boards. The “seared hand-dived St Austell scallops, onion puree and peppered satsumas” sizzled with taste. My companion's roast loin of venison with braised red cabbage and parsnip-and-walnut gratin was as classy and innovative a dish as deer and vegetables could hope to be.

No buffet at breakfast – the ecologically sounder table service has been opted for. Choice is substantial, running from honeyed-plums-in-yogurt to the full Cornish. Leave plenty of time, however: service is once again on the pedestrian side.

The Scarlet could reasonably claim to be surrounded by Britain's freshest air. To walk along the cliff top on a windy day – that is to say, probably on any day – is to be totally invigorated. If you're in the mood for more organised therapeutic wellness, holistic, Ayurvedic and meditative treatments are on hand.

You'll be left thinking that saving the planet shouldn't be this much fun – definitely not this sexy or decadent.

■ **Where** Scarlet Hotel, Tredragon Road, Mawgan Porth, Cornwall, England, 00-44-1637-861800, scarlethotel.co.uk.

■ **What** Luxury ecohotel.

■ **Rooms** 37.

■ **Best rates** Low season (February 12th to May 2nd) from £180 (€200) B&B or £230 (€255) with dinner, per Just Right room per night, based on two people sharing. Two-night minimum stay at weekends.

■ **Food and drink** The Scarlet restaurant, with a stunning vista along the cliffs, plus bar snacks and room service. Don't miss out on Cornish afternoon tea. Coffee and tea are delivered to your room twice a day.

■ **Access** Two bedrooms designed for disabled access; one can connect with the room next door to allow for a carer or companion.

■ **Child-friendliness** Children are not allowed.